



CONTEXT FOR CIVIL UNREST FOLLOWING PANDEMICS

Introduction

Historically, civil unrest and degradation of social cohesion have been common in the immediate aftermath of pandemics or epidemics. The health impacts and restrictions involved in pandemics provide fertile grounds for social unrest and mobilization as pandemics progress or end. This is particularly true when there are existing underlying inequalities and/or social fault-lines within the population (Barret and Chen, Labott, Strohecker). The ongoing trucker protests have several markers demonstrating consistency with this trend.

Academic Literature

The linkages between social unrest and pandemics have been explored by scholars and journalists in academia and media. Historically, pandemics have been observed to create significant social tension which often leads towards civil unrest and/or revolt. By way of example, the Black Death is credited with laying the groundwork for the Peasants Revolt of 1381 (Atwood and Williamson), and the quarantine measures intended to prevent the spread of the bubonic plague in Moscow led to the 1771 plague riot (Pearce).

A study conducted by Censolo and Morelli reviewed data related to protests and unrest around the times of 57 epidemics between the Black Death in the 1300s and the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918. Out of the 57 events studied, they found only four occasions where revolts were not clearly connected with the respective outbreaks. Censolo and Morelli identified three underlying contributors for these disruptions to society:

- 1) Policies aimed at preventing the spread of disease can conflict with people's interests
- 2) Epidemics' impacts on mortality and economic welfare can worsen inequality
- 3) Psychological shock can lead people to believe irrational narratives regarding the spread of disease

Similarly, Phillip Barret and Sophia Chen argue that epidemics, like many forms of disaster, may have social scarring effects that increase the likelihood of social unrest. They acknowledge that often the measures implemented to mitigate the impacts of epidemics (e.g. quarantine) may also have a suppression effect on unrest by dissuading social activities. However, they believe this suppression only lasts for a short time and as the pandemic fades, unrest may re-emerge in locations where it previously existed. Barret and Chen point to the recent trends in social unrest immediately before and after the COVID-19 outbreak as consistent with this historic evidence and indicative of what we can expect moving forward.

For a Canadian historical context, the 1885 vaccine requirements intended to curtail the spread of Smallpox in Montreal resulted in public violence throughout the city. Per the Washington Post, more than 2,000 violent rioters marched through the streets of Montreal screaming, "kill the vaccinators" in response to the mandatory vaccine mandates. All told, nearly 6,000 people died of smallpox in Quebec – 86 percent of whom were children – before the pandemic burned itself out. Writing for the Globe and Mail, Eric Andrew-Gee draws linkages between the conspiracy rhetoric and distrust of science of 1885 and the modern Anti-Vax movements of today. He also highlights the political parallels and far-right leanings of both instances of vaccine resistance and notes that while modern treatments are more sophisticated, the public response is not so different.

Ongoing Trends

The potential rise of civil unrest and the breakdown of social cohesion has been noted throughout the pandemic period. As part of its Year Ahead assessments, the Intelligence Assessment Secretariat (IAS) included potential disruptions to social cohesion as part of both the 2021 “Shaken and Stirring” and 2022 “Something in the Air” issues. As well, the intersection of pandemics and societal unrest is supported by the academic literature addressing this topic – both historically and contemporarily – and has been noted in mainstream media as well.

Year Ahead 2021: Shaken and Stirring

At the time of the Year Ahead 2021 publication, IAS believed there would be a rise in civil unrest, increased gender and social inequality, as well as the exploitation of social and political unrest by malicious actors. IAS noted the expanded role of the state in the economy – particularly as a response to COVID-19 – and how it has impacted the equilibrium of many democracies and unsettled established patterns of partnership and political participation. Gaps in economic participation, peace and security, politics, and health – long standing issues for diverse groups and minorities – were projected to worsen over the course of 2021. The extended isolation and social atomization associated with lockdowns was anticipated to affect mental health, substance abuse and online extremism, and hostility towards perceived government ineptitude and corruption was expected to intensify public distrust. Economic and community upheaval were predicted to be used by extremist organizations of all varieties to aid recruitment and fundraising.

Year Ahead 2022: Something in the Air

In the 2022 Year Ahead, IAS forecasted breakdowns of social cohesion to continue throughout this year and would not significantly subside with pandemic recovery. Key issues such as inequality, political polarization, and the contest between democracy and authoritarianism would contribute to a less cohesive social environment despite emergence from COVID-19. IAS listed the ongoing issues of unemployment, persecution, governance grievances (real and perceived), and food and water security issues to be likely causes of social unrest globally. Pandemic themed anti-authority rhetoric would continue (e.g. decrying mandatory vaccinations and public health restriction as infringements on individual rights and liberties) and socioeconomic inequalities would be drivers of societal strain and division. Polarization and inflammatory narrative in Western nations could also bolster recruitment by Ideologically Motivated Extremist Groups (IMVE) and would be imbued with anti-government, racist, and misogynistic rhetoric. IAS also assessed that current societal divisions would create fertile grounds for protests which would likely result in a high frequency of demonstrations that could escalate to localized violence.

Conclusion

Pandemics can, and often do, create a set of conditions conducive for civil unrest and breakdowns in social cohesion. The Trucker Convoy's anti-authoritarianism theme, calls for restoring individual liberties, and addressing inequalities are likely representative of societal cleavages exacerbated by pandemic conditions. However, protests of the modern era diverge from historical precedent in that they benefit from digitization and advanced technologies that allow for widespread coordination and sophistication. This in turn will increase the velocity, reach, and footprint of the movement beyond what was possible in the past. The “Trucker Protests” happening in Ottawa, throughout Canada, and increasingly around the world are consistent with similar movements following pandemics throughout history. While there is no definitive lifecycle for post-pandemic breakdowns in social cohesion, historical precedent does provide the context for their origin and the issues that need to be addressed.

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